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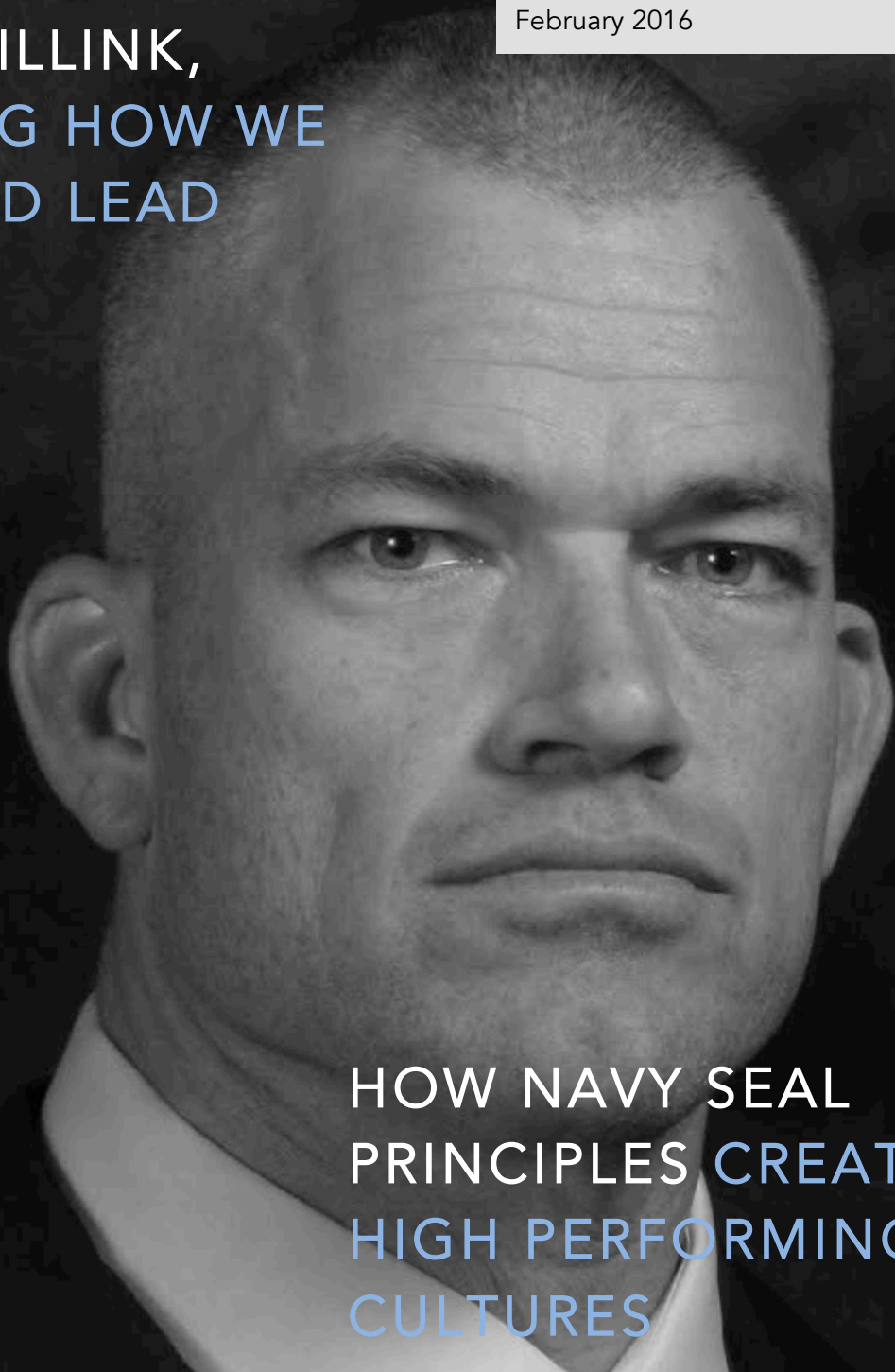
LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES

MONTHLY INSIGHTS

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JOCKO WILLINK,  
CHANGING HOW WE  
THINK AND LEAD

HOW NAVY SEAL  
PRINCIPLES CREATE  
HIGH PERFORMING  
CULTURES



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## Changing How We Think And Lead: Developing A Navy SEAL Mindset



Jocko Willink, a highly decorated Navy SEAL and co-author of best selling business book, *Extreme Ownership*, shares how his experiences as a Navy SEAL and on the battlefield in Iraq can be instrumental to creating high performing cultures in the business world.

**RJ:** Jocko, thanks so much for joining us, and congratulations on your best selling business book, *Extreme Ownership*, on the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* bestseller lists. We couldn't be more delighted to have you with us and truly admire what you've done for our country and your accomplishments as a Navy SEAL. Can we kick off the conversation with some background on yourself?

**Jocko:** Yes, I wrote *Extreme Ownership* with my business partner and co-author of the book, Leif Babin. We were both in the SEAL teams. I spent 20 years in the SEALs teams and we had multiple deployments overseas. The last deployment that I did in the military was with Leif to a place called Ramadi, Iraq, which at the time in 2006 was the epicenter of the insurgency. We went there and fought in a historical battle alongside the US Army and the Marine Corps.

It was a very tough fight, a very violent battlefield, and there were a lot of casualties in the Marine Corps, a lot of casualties in the Army and a lot of casualties within our SEAL unit. When Leif and I got back, we both went into positions where we taught leadership to the junior SEALs. Leif taught the SEALs that were coming out of the basic SEAL pipeline; I was teaching in the advanced training where SEALs

are getting ready to deploy to Iraq and Afghanistan. I was teaching tactics and leadership to those SEAL leaders.

**RJ:** You led the most highly decorated special ops unit during the war. I'd like our readers to understand that what you accomplished there was an amazing feat. The situation you were in was complicated and required continuous adaptation and presented numerous hardships.

**Jocko:** Well, the battlefield was very complex. You're in an insurgency where you've got insurgents living amongst the local populous. So you've got that dilemma of who's good and who's bad, which is very challenging to deal with. You can't just go and raze the whole city because there are friendly civilians with their families — their kids, wives, and husbands — that are trying to raise a family. You can't just go kill everybody because there are innocent people. You have to do it in a much more controlled and deliberate manner. The Army brigade that was deployed there, the First Brigade of the First Armored Division, or 1/1 AD, was tasked to take back the city of Ramadi.

The 1/1 AD had multiple Army battalions and one Marine Corps battalion. What that means in civilian English is there were about 5,600 Soldiers and Marines on the ground in the city of

Ramadi. Their goal was to take the city back street by street, house by house. To do that, they implemented a new strategy called Seize, Clear, Hold and Build. What that meant was going into the enemy controlled territories and building reinforced compounds to live in so coalition forces could stay in those enemy controlled territories.

In the past, leading up to this, the coalition forces would go in and grab a bad guy and leave, and then go in and grab a bad guy and then leave, but they were not having the influence on the populous that was needed. The people were living in complete terror from the insurgents that were savagely murdering, torturing, raping, and killing these innocent civilians. That was the environment. The strategy was then to push in and actually move into these neighborhoods and stay there. I had to look at it from our perspective, how could I help these conventional Army and Marine Corps units do this? We don't build construction projects like the Army Engineers do. We don't have tanks like the Army does. We don't have large infantry units like the Marine Corps does, where they can go and clear whole city blocks by themselves. I had to assess, what can we do to augment and help the situation? What we realized was that as they were building these combat outposts in enemy controlled territories they were going to be very vulnerable to enemy attacks. So we set up a Standard Operating Procedures dictating that when they would go in to build these combat outposts, we would go in as well and set up outside the vicinity with sniper over-watch positions. When the enemy would come to attack we would interdict the enemy and eliminate them before they could execute their attacks on the friendly forces. It was a very dynamic and violent deployment.

While we were in Ramadi with the 1/1 Armored Division "Ready First" Brigade the suffered about 500 wounded and had they had 61 killed in action. In our SEAL Task Unit, we had a significant number wounded. We lost Marc Lee who was the first SEAL killed in Iraq, and Mike Monsoor, who was the second SEAL killed in Iraq, and who was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for jumping on a grenade to

save three of other teammates. And finally, Ryan Job who was shot in the face, was gravely wounded, blinded in both eyes, but who made it back to the States, was medically retired from the Navy and who, after his 22<sup>nd</sup> surgery to repair the damage that was done to his face and his head, died from surgical complications. It was an extremely challenging deployment.

What we realized during this deployment was that, there's a lot of factors that play into victory. But the most important factor is leadership. When we talk about leadership, we're not just talking about me, because I was in charge of the Task Unit or Leif because he was in charge of one of the platoons. We're talking about the entire chain of command, and the squad leader that was in charge of eight guys, the fire team leader that was in charge of four guys, the swim para leader that was in charge of one other guy, and then finally the frontline troop or the frontline SEAL, that was in charge of his piece of mission and was going to lead that and make it happen and have an impact. That was the biggest lesson we learned.

**RJ: I wanted to hone in on something, because the premise of the book, *Extreme Ownership*, relates to getting people to really own the results. Maybe we could just spend a little bit of time on this topic?**

**Jocko:** Yes, the book is called *Extreme Ownership* and is about a mindset that you're not going to make any excuses when things go wrong. You're not going to cast any blame on anyone else. You're going to say, "Hey, this is my problem. And I own it and I'm going to find a solution for it." What's interesting is you might think that, if you say to your subordinates, "Hey, guys, the mission was a failure, it was my fault." They're going to look at you and say, "Yeah, that's right, it was your fault, not mine." But that does not happen. If you think about the converse of that, RJ, if you're working for me and I say, "Hey, we failed the mission, it was your fault, you did this wrong, you did that wrong." You're immediately going to get defensive and you're not going to accept that responsibility, you're going to challenge it and say, "No, it wasn't my fault, it was that guy's fault or it was your fault,

boss.” You might not say it to my face but you’ll think it and that’s just as bad. People think that’s what’s going to happen when the leader takes ownership.

But it’s actually the opposite that happens. And when I look at you and I say RJ, “Hey, the mission was a failure, it was my fault, here’s what I did wrong. I didn’t get the plan clearly across to you guys obviously. I don’t think I had the right assets in place. I should have gotten better resources to support us. This was my fault, this is what I’m going to change to get it done next time.” What really happens is, you look at me and say, “You know what boss, it wasn’t your fault. I should have told you we needed more resources, next time I’ll let you know.” Or, “I should have told you we needed to be prepared for this contingency to happen but I didn’t say anything.” What you end up with is the whole team becomes problem solvers. They all take ownership of the problems and they all look to solve them instead of looking to pass the buck. That’s how the attitude was in our Task Unit - everybody was looking to be a problem solver and get things done to accomplish the mission.

**RJ: Switching over into the complexity of a situation and how with changes minute to minute, one needs to keep composure and stay calm and think clearly. Is that through training; how does one make good decisions in the face of impending dire situations?**

**Jocko:** So there’s two parts to that: number one, yes, you get inoculated through the training. There’s going to be explosions going off and there’s going to be machine guns, there’s going to be smoke, there’s going to be stress, there’s going to be people yelling. The training has those elements in it, and I’m not talking about the basic SEAL training, although there’s some of it in there. I’m talking about the more advanced SEAL training, when you’re getting ready to deploy. In that training, we impose all kinds of mayhem on our troopers and on our SEALs so that they are inoculated to that kind of stress. What they learn and what I learned at a young age in the SEAL teams was that when things are crazy and there’s chaos and mayhem,

what you have to do is detach. *You can’t have your emotions all wrapped up and you can’t stay inside your own head.*

You have to, literally with your weapon (if you imagine looking down the sights of your weapon) lift your weapon and point it at the sky. It’s called high port, so now clearly you’re not engaging any targets, you’re not shooting at anyone. You have your weapon pointed in the air, you’re not pulling the trigger, you step back off the firing line and you literally turn your head and look around and see what’s happening. That is a physical representation of the detachment that you have to do, to pull your head out of the emotion and out of the chaos of the firefight. I tell the same thing to leaders in the business world today. When things are getting crazy and they start to feel themselves get emotional about a decision or they start feeling the pressure, they have to do the exact same thing. They have to detach from that stress and that pressure mentally. They have to step back off the firing line so they can get a better and clearer assessment of what’s happening and then they can use their judgment to make a good decision, make it quickly and make it accurately.

**RJ: There’s an interesting scenario in the book, the boat races, that demonstrates the power of a good leader and where a good leader could have a great impact on a poorly performing team.**

**Jocko:** Well, leadership is absolutely the most important factor, there’s no doubt about that. And if you offered me a platoon that had a bunch of outstanding individuals and a crappy leader versus a team of okay individuals with an outstanding leader, I’d take the outstanding leader all day long. And the outstanding leader would turn those people around and make them into outstanding performers. We would actually see that in the SEAL teams all the time, when we were running training. If you had a SEAL platoon that was an ordinary platoon, but they had a bad leader, they would fall apart. We would fire those leaders and then bring in a guy that was good and instantly you’d get a much better performing team.

In the book that's represented in the story of the basic SEAL training where you have these boat crews of seven guys and one of the boat crews is winning every race. They're paddling and then running with the boats on their heads and dragging the boats through obstacle courses. There's one boat crew that's basically winning every single race and another boat crew that's losing every single race. The SEAL instructors switched out the leaders of the boat crews and, lo and behold, all of a sudden the boat crew that was literally losing every race is now winning every race. And nothing had changed but the leadership. Again it's clear that the right leader is more important than anything else.

Are there some people that just can't lead? The answer is, yes, there are some people that are not going to be good leaders. What's interesting is there's only one common factor of the leaders that I was involved in firing from the SEAL teams and the leaders that I've been involved with and firing from civilian businesses. It's never about their tactical decision-making, it's never about their knowledge, it's never about their physical attributes.

What it boils down to 99.9% of the time is a leader that has so big of an ego that they can't listen to anybody else. They're un-coachable. And with a guy like that or a girl like that, that just is un-coachable because their ego cannot accept criticism and cannot accept the fact that there might be a better way to do things, those are the folks that do not make it in leadership positions. The most important characteristic for leaders is humility so that they can look and see if there's a better way and accept when they're not doing a good job and letting their team down. That is the most important factor, is having that humility to look in the mirror and do a real self-assessment, a hard and brutally honest self-assessment and realize where your weaknesses are and what you can do better.

**RJ: Humility and self-awareness are key characteristics - have you seen other common characteristics among effective leaders?**

**Jocko:** Well, you talked about humility, that's obviously key; you have to take ownership as a leader, that's key as well. I just talked about the ability to detach, but what really separates the outstanding leaders from the marginal leaders is *the ability to be balanced*. And that's one thing that's interesting about leadership, because if I could give you a bullet point list of 10 qualities that they have to have and this is what they have to do every time, our book would be one page long and I wouldn't be in business because it would be so easy to lead. But the fact of the matter is what's hard about being a leader is that there's opposing forces in leadership that are pulling you in multiple different directions. What a good leader has to do is balance those opposing forces. We call it the dichotomy of leadership.

So for example, you have to be confident as a leader. You know, you can't get things done if you're not confident. But at the same time you can't be cocky or overconfident because then you're going to underestimate the competitor or the enemy and they're going to get the advantage. You have to be aggressive. You have to be aggressive to make things happen. You have to impose your will aggressively on situations to make them go in your favor, that's true in combat and it's true in the business world. That being said, you can be overly aggressive. And if you're overly aggressive, for instance, in a combat situation, you could run to your death because you're being overly aggressive and not assessing the situation right and not seeing what the risks are. And you could be over aggressive with your team and get to a point where you're so aggressive and overbearing in the way you treat people that no one wants to offer up any suggestions. You end up not working with the minds of everyone on your team; it's just you alone. I promise you, there's no one in the world that alone is smarter than a team of people, it just doesn't exist.

When I talk about being detached, you can't let your emotions run things. But at the same time you can't be devoid of emotions because if you are, then you're a robot. And humans don't follow robots. So there are all these little

nuances and opposing forces that you have to learn how to balance.

Another good one is being a leader and a follower; just because you're the platoon commander or the troop commander or the CEO or the president, doesn't mean that there's not time to say, "You know what, this person has a better feel of what's happening with this situation, I'm going to let them take the lead and I'm going to step back and I'm going to follow." So you have to know when to lead and when to follow.

I'd say one of the most challenging characteristics to balance is the title of the book: *Extreme Ownership*. You've got to take ownership of everything in your world. At the same time one of the principles and laws of combat that we teach is Decentralized Command and the basis of Decentralized Command is that everybody is a leader. So that's another balance that a leader has to make. A leader is supposed to take Extreme Ownership of everything, but at the same time let everyone else lead, so how does that work? Well, it's simple, that is the balance. Finding that balance is the art of leadership.

**RJ: You've led a very successful life and you're continuing to achieve. Where did you get your start and were you always interested in the military?**

**Jocko:** I grew up in a small New England town. Ever since I can remember wanting to do anything significant with my life, I wanted to be some kind of commando. When I got done with high school, I'd heard that the SEALs had a very tough program and I wanted to do the toughest one I could find. I was a pretty rebellious kid and I was a troublemaker and when I told my dad, "Hey, I enlisted in the Navy and I'm going to try and be in the SEAL teams," he just said, "Well, you're not going to like it at all, in fact you're going to hate it because you hate authority and you don't listen to anybody." He was probably pretty accurate. When you talk about what drives somebody, one of the things that always drove me was I didn't like authority and I didn't like listening to people. So when you're in the

military, how do you set yourself up so you don't have to listen to people? It's pretty simple, you work hard and you stay ahead of the things you're going to be told to do. So I was always trying to stay ahead so no one was going to tell me what to do. It's kind of a funny attitude to have, but it pushed me to try and perform well and it ended up being very beneficial.

**RJ: I know you're big into Brazilian jiu-jitsu, are there any parallels between your fitness regiment and discipline? I know that one of your axioms is that discipline equals freedom — can you touch on that?**

**Jocko:** Of course. That's a huge one and is kind of the way I live my life or at least I'm always striving to live my life that way: Discipline Equals Freedom. If you want to have freedom then you have to have discipline. For instance, if you want to have financial freedom, you've got to have financial discipline. If you want to have more free time then you've got to have a more disciplined time management schedule. I wake up very early in the morning, I'm usually up before 4:30 in the morning. The first thing I do when I wake up is I go work out and I find that that really sets up my day for success. And the days when, for whatever reason I can't do that, I feel horrible and I'm not as sharp mentally. There's so many ways that physical fitness helps you in life.

Now, the Brazilian jiu-jitsu piece, what's interesting about jiu-jitsu is that it is maneuver warfare- you're trying to set the person up and not go strength versus strength with them. The idea of not going against peoples' strengths is very important to my mindset and how I deal in the business world and how I deal with egos and relationships. I try not to go head to head with people. You've got to take an indirect approach and maneuver to the flank.

On the battlefield we have a saying that *he who flanks first wins*. And it's the same thing in jiu-jitsu which is, you think I'm going to choke you, but I'm really going to attack your arm or you think I'm going to attack your arm but I'm really going to attack your neck. And then when you're dealing with people, with humans, oftentimes if you go direct head to head with them they're

going to be resistant to it, whereas if you take an indirect approach and you make them think that the idea that you want them to execute on is their idea, you're going to be much more successful. That kind of attitude that comes from combat, maneuver warfare, and jiu-jitsu, and translates into business perfectly.

People think in the military it's all about the chain of command, and it's not like that. The people that are in the military and including the SEAL teams, they're not terminator robots, they're human beings and they have their own egos, issues, ideas, intelligence and their own motivation. So you can't just think that they're going to respond to you like a machine. No: you have to actually lead them.

That's another thing that makes leadership so challenging is that all people are different. My career in the military was built on the relationships I had with the people I worked with and the people I worked for and the people that worked for me. And it is the same thing in the business world: the relationships you build are stronger than the chain of command and that always sounds surprising to people. But when I needed tanks to go out to the city of Ramadi to rescue my guys from being overrun, the person that I was calling didn't work for me, as a matter of fact he wasn't even in the same chain of command as me. The main reason that they were motivated to help us was because we had real legitimate, trusting relationships with them. That's a very important piece of being successful in the business world as well as in the military and in life.

**RJ: Jocko, thank you so much for your time. And on behalf of our readership, thank you for everything you've done to serve our country.**

**Jocko:** Appreciate that and it was an absolute honor to serve. Thank you.

*Jocko Willink and Leif Babin are co-authors of Extreme Ownership. More from Jocko and his philosophies on leadership can be heard on his podcast - Jocko Podcast. You can also follow Jocko and Leif on Twitter @jockowillink and @leifbab*



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